



Welcome

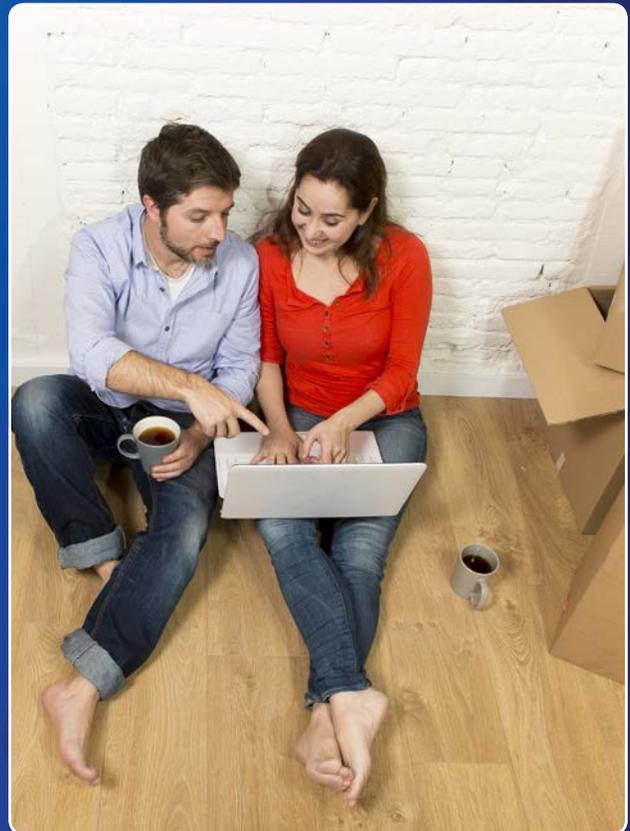
Welcome to our latest edition of Landlord Links newsletter from the Council's Benefit Service covering the latest news and developments in Housing Benefit, Local Housing Allowance and Council Tax Support.

2016 has so far proved to be another year of reforms to the housing benefit system, which will affect many of your tenants. It looks like the rest of the year and into 2017 will be more of the same. The next big reform is the reduced Benefit Cap that will be implemented from November; we share more about this inside.

We have also made major improvements to the way both you and your tenants communicate with the Benefit Service by moving online. Your tenants can now move address and notify us of a change of circumstances by an entirely online process which includes the facility to be able to upload documents in support of their claim.

They can also start a brand new application process online. Our digital revolution has many advantages such as access 24 hours a day which means no delays in claiming, please read on to find out about the other advantages of our new online service.

Lee Higgins Customer, Benefits, Registration and Library Service Manager



In this edition of Landlord Links...

- **Local Housing Allowance Changes and Rates**
- **Welfare Benefit Reforms**
- **Landlord Portal**
- **Changes to Housing Benefit Service – New Claim Process**
- **Benefit Assessment Team update**
- **Contact Details**

Local Housing Allowance Changes

The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates used within Housing Benefit claims are reviewed each year and any changes come into effect from 1 April.

However, in last July's Budget, It was announced that Local Housing Allowance rates will be frozen for four years from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2020.

This means there will be no increase in the current rates payable for this period, but if market rent levels drop, rates could decrease as they can do under the current system.

New rates will be published in January, to be implemented in the following April.

In effect the rates that current apply will be set for 4 years with slight changes depending on market rents.

More information on how LHA rates have been calculated can be found on the VOA website or by clicking on the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-local-housing-allowances-rates-broad-rental-market-areas>

LHA rates for Telford & Wrekin Area for 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017

	Weekly	Monthly
Shared Rate*	£68.81	£298.18
1 Bedroom Rate	£87.41	£378.78
2 Bedroom Rate	£109.32	£473.72
3 Bedroom Rate	£129.47	£561.04
4 Bedroom Rate	£170.67	£739.57

*Shared Accommodation Rate (applies to those in shared accommodation and most single under 35 year olds)



Council Tax Support Consultation

The national system for assessing and awarding Council Tax benefit was abolished in April 2013 and instead replaced with locally designed Council Tax Support schemes.

We are proposing to make changes to our local scheme from 1 April 2017. Please see our consultation document at www.telford.gov.uk/counciltaxsupport

We are keen to give everyone, whether they claim support or not, the opportunity to have their say on our proposals before any changes are decided.

Consultation starts on 8 September 2016 and ends on 1 November 2016 to meet the Council's budget setting timetable and to allow sufficient time for responses to be considered and evaluated.

Please give us your views. Councillors need these to decide on the final changes to our Council Tax Support scheme for 2017/18. I would be grateful if you could complete the survey no later than Tuesday 1 November 2016. As always we will treat the information that you provide in the strictest confidence.



Landlord Portal

The Landlord Portal was launched in January 2014 and has proven to be a great success to Housing Associations, Social Landlords, Private landlords and letting agents alike.

Due to the success of this product we no longer issue paper payment schedules to landlords as this information is now available via the Portal.

The Landlord Portal enables you to securely access our website and view real-time information regarding the benefit payments you are receiving on behalf of your tenants.

You will also have the ability to search for claims, look at basic claim details such as weekly benefit entitlement, claim status and view payment history of the claims where payments have been made to you.

You will also be able to export this data to a spreadsheet which would help in managing your tenant's accounts and keeping your records up to date.

The Landlord Portal is simple to use and contains more information than was previously shown on the paper schedules. It should also reduce the need for you to have to call us to enquire about housing benefit payments, which I know some of you find frustrating at peak times.

To request access to the Landlord Portal, you can complete the application on our website and we will then register your details and email your personal user ID, temporary password and link to the Landlord Portal together with a user guide. Letting Agents and larger landlords can apply for staff members to have access to the portal.

It's important that when you're given access, that you keep a record of your own personal password and that your access is not shared with anyone. Unauthorised access to the portal will result in all access for your organisation being suspended.

Welfare Benefit Reforms

Benefit Cap reduced

There is currently a Benefit Cap in place restricting the amount of certain benefits that a working age household can receive per year. The current Benefit Cap is £26,000 per year, but the Government are placing a further cap (maximum limit) on the total amount of benefit that can be received to £20,000 from November 2016.

This means that your tenants will only be able to get a maximum of £384.50 per week across all of the state benefits if they are a couple or a family, or a maximum of £258.00 per week if they are a single person.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should have already contacted all customers affected by the Benefit Cap to explain about this change.

We understand the first batch of cases will be processed from 07 November 2016 and it looks like this will be completed over a phased period. The benefits included to calculate if benefit income exceeds the benefit cap are:

- Child Benefit
- Child Tax Credit
- Housing Benefit
- Incapacity Benefit
- Income Support
- Jobseeker's Allowance
- Employment and Support Allowance (except when in the support group)
- Maternity Allowance
- Severe Disablement Allowance
- Widowed Parent's Allowance & Bereavement Allowance

However, it is only a tenants Housing Benefit that will be reduced to bring their income closer to the cap level.

Households are exempt from the cap if the claimant, partner or any children qualify for any of these Benefits:

- Working Tax Credit
- Attendance Allowance
- Disability Living Allowance
- Personal Independence Payment
- The support component of Employment and Support Allowance
- Industrial Injuries Benefits (and equivalent payments as part of a war disablement pension or the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme)
- War Widow's or War Widower's Pension
- Carer's Allowance and Guardian Allowance, which is due to be added shortly.

We have also written to all customers affected by the Benefit Cap in the Telford and Wrekin area to offer help and guidance in preparation of the implementation of this major benefit reform.

This has been followed up by a phone call to all non Housing Association customers (as they requested to call their own tenants) to ensure they are aware of this change and give them the opportunity to start and make changes, so they may be in a position to pay their rent shortfall ongoing.

Family Premium

The Family Premium of £17.45 per week applies to the assessment of Housing Benefit when a claimant has one or more children. This premium was abolished for new Housing Benefit claims and new births from 1 May 2016.

Backdating

From 1 April 2016 Housing Benefit backdating is reduced so that new claims from working age claimants can only be backdated for a maximum of 1 month. Backdating can only be considered if your tenant shows good cause for making a late claim.

Temporary Absence Rules

The government has made a change to the rules on claiming housing benefit when a tenant goes abroad. From 28 July 2016 a person can usually only get housing benefit for up to 4 weeks if they are abroad.

Anywhere outside England, Scotland and Wales counts as abroad, so staying in Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man count as going abroad.

In certain circumstances housing benefit can be paid for a longer period, for example up to:

- 8 weeks where absence is connected to the death of a close relative
- 26 weeks when getting medical treatment

- 26 weeks if working on a ship or a member of the armed forces on operations abroad
- 26 weeks if fleeing domestic violence

Your tenant must expect to return within the time allowed, their housing benefit will stop as soon as they go away if they know they will be away longer than the rules allow.

Tenants don't have to tell the council every time they are away from home for a short period.

Your tenant must tell the housing benefit service if they know their stay away will last more than the rules allow. If we are not told then your tenant could be overpaid housing benefit and will have to pay this overpayment back.



My Council Tax

Do you need to contact the Council to inform us of a change relating to your tenant for Council Tax purposes only?

Has your tenant moved out?

Has a new tenant moved in?

You're now able to go on line and report this change, to enable the account holder for Council Tax to be updated. It's quick and easy to use.

View it, pay it
Anytime, anywhere

www.telford.gov.uk/mycounciltax

Our Benefit Service has moved online

We have been working hard to transform our service to make it more accessible. This includes the creation of a number of new online forms that streamline the process for both your tenants and yourselves. This channel shift initiative helps customers to self serve, rather than have to wait on the telephone or make frequent visits to the office.

What to do if your tenant needs to make a new claim.

If your tenant is not currently in receipt of Housing Benefit but needs to make a claim they can use our online intention to claim form at www.telford.gov.uk/benefits.

The form is simple to use and doesn't ask any complicated questions. There are separate forms for working age and pension credit age customers due to the different rules for pensioners – but don't worry there is more information about this on our online form.

Advantages of this new online form:

- Your tenant can register their interest in making a claim 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- No delays in your tenant's claim start date as long as they complete the claim process within one month.
- Your tenant can book an appointment to see a Benefit Officer at a time that is convenient for them.
- They will receive an email receipt confirming the date and time of their appointment and a list of the evidence they need to bring with them.
- Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support will still be calculated whilst your tenant is present and the Benefit Officer will explain how much benefit they are entitled to and they will print and give your tenant their Housing Benefit notification while they wait

- No waiting in long queues to make a new claim

Your tenant will need to bring original proof of their ID and National Insurance Number, their tenancy / licence agreement, income and capital to the appointment.

We know that some landlords / agents have online access in their offices which they allow their tenants to use – you may want your tenant to complete the online form as part of the tenancy sign up process. It is however important that your tenant chooses an appointment for a date after they will have moved in. We are unable to calculate their claim until we know they have moved in.

We are finding that more and more tenants have internet access via their mobile phones and they can also use their local library but if your tenant isn't able to use the internet and you are not in a position to assist them they can ring **01952 383838** to register their interest to claim and book an appointment.

It is important that your tenant turns up to their appointment on time – if they don't then we will have to re-book them an appointment for a different time and possibly a different date which may delay their claim.

What to do if your tenant changes address

If your tenant is already in receipt of Housing Benefit and change address then they can use our change of address form. On this form your tenant can provide us with details of when they moved out of their old address and details of their new address. They just then need to upload proof of their tenancy / licence agreement and we will do the rest.

Your tenant won't need to make an appointment to see us and we will contact them if we require any further information. We will undertake residency checks to ensure that the tenant has moved into the property.

The form is available at www.telford.gov.uk/benefits

What to do if your tenant needs to report a change of circumstances

Once your tenant has a live claim if they have a change in their circumstances then they can tell us about it via our online change of circumstance form. They can also upload the evidence of the change.

We currently promise to action the change (providing the necessary evidence has been provided) within three working days. Our online change of circumstance form can be found at:

www.telford.gov.uk/benefits

Alternatively your tenant can email us at **benefit.service@telford.gov.uk**

In the limited circumstances when your tenant still needs to see us then they can book an appointment by ringing **01952 383838**. We will try to assist them over the phone and if not we will book them an appointment at First Point, Southwater One.

It is important that your tenant turns up to their appointment on time – if they don't then we will have to re-book them an appointment for a different time and possibly a different date.



Need to get in touch? Save Time and Do It Online!

If you have a general enquiry please go to **www.telford.gov.uk** first to look at our newly updated Benefit FAQs.

More landlord information can be found at **www.telford.gov.uk/landlordbenefitinfo**

You can report a change in your tenants address using our new online form. Go to **www.telford.uk/benefitchangeincircumstances**

To report any other changes email us at **benefit.service@telford.gov.uk**

You can report suspected Benefit Fraud using our online form at **www.telford.gov.uk/fraud** by emailing **investigations@telford.gov.uk** or by using the **Everyday Telford app** for Iphone, Android and Windows phones.

If you can't go online or email us, phone us on **01952 383838**. Our lines get very busy between 10.30am and 2pm so avoid calling then unless you are prepared to wait in a queue.

If you are having problems receiving payments or want to request direct payment you can email us at **landlord.liaison@telford.gov.uk** or if you can't email then phone us on **01952 383858**.

If you don't have internet access or email or if you need to contact us out of hours phone us on **01952 383839**.

Benefit Assessment Team News

The Department for Work and Pensions have recently published the speed of processing figures for the year 2015/16. Again we were top of the West Midland Councils and there were only two Councils with quicker processing times new claims in the UK and 17 Councils with a quicker change of circumstance processing time. Our average processing time for a new Housing Benefit claim was 9 days (national average 23 days) and 4 days for a change of circumstance (national average 7 days).

It's been a very busy time in the Benefit Assessment Team with many changes being implemented since April. With new technology and the ever pressing need to reduce our operating costs things have been moving at a faster pace than usual. Our average processing times for July 2016 were just under 12 days for new claims and 5 days for change of circumstances.

At the beginning of May our Benefit Officers joined our Customer Service Contact Centre so that we have officers with current benefit assessment experience answering incoming calls. We have been able to drastically reduce call waiting times and abandonment rates, this has had a small impact on our back office work and so we have been looking

at why people are contacting us. You will see from the article on our online forms we are changing the way customers interact with us. It is important that customers self serve wherever possible so that we can continue to process benefit claims and changes quickly. Please encourage your tenants to:

- Use our online forms for change of circumstance, change of address and when they have an intention to make a new claim.
- Check out our new Frequently Asked Question section on our website before making contact
- Look at our understanding your benefit notifications web page including our new short video to answer any questions they have about their notification.

All our online forms and information can be found at **www.telford.gov.uk/benefits**

We monitor the calls we receive and a small number of landlords are ringing us up asking for a breakdown of payments. We have provided landlords with the free landlord portal so that they can obtain details of who payments are for and what period they cover (they can even be downloaded and saved in excel). We no longer provide confirmation of payment details over the phone. Please see the article on Landlord Portal for more information on how to gain access.

